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Review of Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds

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Review of *Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds*

Abstract

This review of *Gender as Love* offers a summary and critical analysis of Dr. Felipe do Vale's trailblazing work on gender identity, human love, and the placement of both within God's economy.

Keywords

Do Vale, gender, love, theology, feminism, dysphoria, identity, Augustine, desire, social

Cover Page Footnote

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Do Vale, Felipe. *Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023. 259 pp. \$24.49.

“What is a woman?” This question has made waves in recent times, especially among those of conservative political leanings involved in the discussion of gender identity in the West. Unfortunately, some have attempted to answer this question in far too harsh of a manner. Felipe do Vale in *Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds* certainly does not fall into this category. In this cutting-edge work, do Vale explores an answer to the aforementioned question by first asking, “What is gender?” (24) Drawing on prominent feminist theologians, Augustine of Hippo, and the redemptive history of Christianity, do Vale charts a theology of gender according to God, balancing biblical, historical, and contemporary thoughts on gender into a cohesive path forward for Christians in such a critical discussion.

Do Vale begins by identifying two bifurcations in philosophical discussions of gender that he believes are problematic. The first is ontological: many see gender as *either* socially constructed *or* as biologically determined. The second is methodological: theologians discussing gender *either* rely too heavily on other disciplines to supplement their theology *or* retreat into comfortable theological spaces, shaking their fists at their intellectual enemies. To deal with the second bifurcation, do Vale proposes adherence to John Webster’s “theological theology.” That is to say, theologians may sufficiently investigate gender solely by theologically viewing Scripture as “an *economy* and viewing its truthmakers as the *actions of the Triune God, with a basis in God’s immanent life.*” (12) Gender, as all things, is best understood by situating it within the narrative of God’s person and works in the Bible and the Christian life.

Though do Vale somewhat rejects the social constructionist view of gender, he recognizes its prominence among contemporary philosophers and theologians and explores the various perspectives of social constructionists such as Sally Haslanger, Kathryn Tanner, and Judith Butler. His solution for the first bifurcation lies in defining gender through social traits that are rooted in a person’s biological sex. “It is the appropriation of cultural goods pertaining to the sexed body by means of which the sexed body is socially manifested.” (110) Do Vale further defines gender as the organizing of social goods that stem from a person’s desires which, according to his exploration of Augustine’s theology of human love, ought to be oriented around the things that *God* loves. In this vein, do Vale sees a human as a loving being whose essence is determined by those things that they love.

At the crux of his argument, do Vale proposes that gender, situated and viewed through the creation, fall, redemption, and consummation of humanity, is

best understood as love. It is the love of things that God desires for men and women pertaining to their creation. "Gendered goods must be loved in God, in the order intended for proper use, and according to the specifications of the gift giver." (175) Observations of gender today reveal deep marring by sin that has and continues to lead to discrimination, oppression, and unimaginable pain for many. Do Vale suggests that this theological understanding allows for both the alleviation of suffering on account of gender and genuine, expectant hope for God's full restoration of humankind.

Fellipe do Vale's exposition of John Webster's "theological theology", though not revolutionary, quickly reveals the high caliber of reflection in *Gender as Love*. The purely theological approach taken in the book stands out among other discussions by Christians on gender due to do Vale's keen observation of some theologians erroneously viewing theology as insufficient to give an account of gender that leads to productive results sans the incorporation of other disciplines. The author sufficiently reaches the goal of Webster's thought to be maximally theological rather than involving theology just barely enough to call something Christian thought. Do Vale recognizes that theology "has God as its object and inquires about all other topics in the light of God as their source and true end." (13) The book, though influenced by and expounding upon secular thought and disciplines, reads as a markedly sacred work. *Gender as Love* is written with God as the foundation, center, beginning, and end of its examination of such a salient topic as gender.

Do Vale approaches his theology of gender from a distinctly eschatological focus, bringing to light the realities of sin and suffering while also pointing to the restoration of all things in Christ. Where other reflections on gender may see no ultimate end to the oppression wrought on maleness and femaleness, do Vale offers hope. The Bible teaches that humankind cannot be separated from its divine intention and that a human is tied to God's perfect plan to once again dwell with his people. "Christians confess a redemption ultimately fulfilled in the eschaton, where what it means to be women and men will be seen and experienced in the way it ought to be." (99) By both affirming an eschatological view of gender essentialism and weaving a tapestry of gender in the movements of the Bible's redemptive history, do Vale brings hope to a conversation where many see despair.

Beyond do Vale's theological and eschatological development of defining gender, his posture throughout the book is notably kind and loving. Accusations of harshness or hatefulness levied against Christianity on account of its teachings contrary to contemporary gender identity are nearly impossible to level against *Gender as Love*. Do Vale's work gives an account of gender that acknowledges the true suffering of those who experience gender discrimination or feel out of touch with their sexed bodies, providing a profoundly refreshing analysis in a

world where misunderstanding and vitriol are far too often directed at many who question traditional views on gender. “For so many, the call to love one’s enemy does not require traveling very far, for their nearest enemy looks back at them in the mirror.” (176) Do Vale writes the book both for those who affirm their sex while struggling with the social expectations of gender placed upon them and those who find difficulty in affirming their sex. Men and women suffering through life from gender discrimination, pressure, and stereotypes are highlighted in *Gender as Love* and given affirmation of their pain alongside a reasonable way forward. Additionally, the plight of gender dysphoria and confusion is viewed with deep compassion in the book in light of sin’s influence and the fear many people experience at the idea of needing to live their lives feeling locked in a body they despise without any hope that their pain will be alleviated. However, as do Vale argues, the Bible teaches, and Christians confess, relief will come to pass in the kingdom of God.

All essential aspects of humankind, including gender, will be restored to glory upon the fulfillment of God’s narrative and the return of Jesus Christ. For now, theologians, students, and laypersons ready to brave the intellectual rigor of *Gender as Love* will benefit from Felipe do Vale’s profoundly theological focus and deeply loving writing, finishing the book well-equipped to better understand gender issues and minister to all in light of God and his divine actions.